



Happy Christmas

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It is the 'Festival of Adoration'

By Frank Walker

Some years ago, during the hours of darkness, an IRA terrorist hid himself in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge. He sat in the choir stalls and stared at the great picture by Rubens, *The Adoration of the Kings*, that hangs behind the high altar. Then, in a frenzy, he deliberately slashed the painting as violently as he could. (Happily, it has since been perfectly restored.) What could have prompted so seemingly pointless an act of vandalism? Possibly he was mentally unhinged, or drunk? It was a strange and curious episode, but not, I think, without significance.

The story of the adoration of the kings does not appear in the gospels. Only in one gospel, Matthew, is the story told of the journey of the magi. They were not kings but astrologers who followed a mysterious moving star, and we are not told how many they were. Christian tradition (showing the profoundest insight) has turned them into kings, seeing one of them as a black African, and has even given them names, Melchior, Gaspar, and Baltasar. Artists have delighted in depicting them prostrating themselves before the Christ Child and offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This is a mythical, not a factual story; it is a tale whose meaning is expressed in symbols and pictures. It deals with perennial psychological realities, not with one-off happenings in history.

The theme of the King's College painting is adoration. That word has come to have a churchy sound. We hear it at Christmas, but it may seem old-fashioned and remote from our experience - or so we may think. If so, we are utterly mistaken. Adoration is one of the most earthy and everyday realities of human life. It is inescapable, vital, essential. If it were to disappear life would lose its savour and its basic humanity. It might even disappear.

In Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*, Sir Andrew Aguecheek,

something of a ludicrous wimp, wistfully declares, "I was adored once!" But so were we all! We were adored by our mothers and fathers. It is not too much to say that that this adoration brought us into life. It sustained us through the perils of helpless infancy until we developed the strength to lead an independent existence. Adoration gave us life. Where adoration is absent or fails - as sometimes it does - the result is tragic

disaster and misery. If adoration completely disappeared, human life would be at an end.

The Christ Child in the picture is the centre of radiant beauty. He represents divine potentiality. He appears weak, defenceless, powerless, and so needs and deserves the utmost care and devotion. Yet he also represents life's delight in itself, and its unimaginable power to bring itself forth again and again in endless renewal.

What is government for? It exists not for itself but to protect, support, nourish, affirm the life so beautifully present, so fragile yet so powerful in potentiality, in this Child. Government is truly but the servant of human well-being. So the kings must kneel, prostrate

themselves in homage and offer their richest gifts to the Child who represents the deepest humanity.

This image of Adoration shows up as shoddy and ignoble all that would seek to harm and defile the Child and human well-being. It is an affront to the murderous destructiveness of terrorists of every persuasion. No wonder that drunken thug in the Chapel years ago could not bear it and lashed out in a frenzy of destruction. Tragically, the Child's beauty and innocence are always threatened by the evil and the ignorant. But in every act of loving devotion to every new-born child, the divine image of the Holy Child is restored. Every Christmas gives us yet again this wonderful sense of Life's renewing power. O come let us adore!

The Rev Frank Walker is Minister Emeritus at Cambridge.



Meditation

The gifts we bring

Let us join now in a time of reflection in which I invite you to consider the gifts that we all bring to the world and the gifts we receive.

You might like to start by turning your attention inwards, perhaps closing your eyes or softening your gaze, being aware of your body, this amazing creation that transports each of us through our lives, this source of both joy and pain, anxiety and delight.

Allow your body to become still, to find as comfortable position as it can, perhaps with your feet resting on the floor and your arms resting gently into your lap. Take a breath or two with awareness and astonishment at the complexity of this chemical exchange, marvelling at the breath of life itself, enjoying a sense of letting go for a while as your breath out and feel your body relaxing, settling, deepening.

Then I invite you to consider, if you wish, the unique gifts that you bring to the world. You are the only you, there never has been nor ever will be someone quite like you. As the wise men brought gifts to the infant Jesus, you too bring gifts to the world. Your personality, your particular skills and aptitudes, your knowledge, your wisdom, your insights, your life experiences – yours and yours alone, yet enabling you to offer back something to the world that no-one else can quite replicate.

As we enter a time of shared silence now I invite you to consider what it is you bring as your gift to the world and what it is you receive. The silence will be brought to an end with some music. And then when the music finishes let us sit together for a further minute allowing the beauty of silence to enfold us.

*The Rev Sarah Tinker
Essex Church, Kensington*



The INQUIRER

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"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

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Christmas — —

By Cliff Reed

A while ago, I read Geraldine Brooks' excellent novel, 'March'. The title is the name of the central character, a chaplain with the Union Army in the American Civil War. He is an idealist; one of those for whom that war really was a moral crusade against the slave-owning Confederacy.

He is very much a liberal theologically and quite clearly a Unitarian. He comes from Concord, Massachusetts, and the novel includes some of his letters home. In one he writes: 'By the time you receive this, whatever festivities the Christmas season may have afforded will be memories. I hope my girls were able, even in these hard times, to find some merriment and some meaning.' The situation in which he wrote his letters home is grim, far worse than he ever lets on to his wife, to whom they are addressed. Geraldine Brooks has done her research well. She presents an accurate picture of the horror and brutality of war. She captures well the intrinsic and corrupting evil of the slave system which underpinned the 'old South's' facade of gallantry and civilization. And she also presents the far from idealistic motives, let alone deeds, of many on the Union side.

For Captain March, the experience is one of disillusion; a crushing test for his liberal and optimistic faith. Lying wounded in a makeshift military hospital, he is haunted by the memory of the 'freed' slaves he had come to know on a 'liberated' plantation, only to see them murdered or led back into bondage by Confederate forces. Obsessed by an unfounded sense of guilt at his failure to save them, he refuses a medical discharge. This would be to abandon them again – especially the children, whose lives under slavery were in such stark contrast to those of his own four daughters living in freedom. The 'war of

(Continued on next page)

Inquiring Words

Entering December...

The time of daylight – already brief – grows shorter still

A primeval fear stirs within as life-sustaining sunshine dwindles

As our ancestors did in ages past,

We kindle a flame against the darkness

And treasure its flickering glow

Let there be light

– Light to illuminate the faces of loved ones

– Light to vanquish the shadows of hatred and fear

– Light to bring hope to the despairing

And the sweet light of love – its wonder to share.

– The Rev Andy Pakula

With thanks

This colour double-issue of *The Inquirer* was sponsored by the Bury Unitarian Church, Lancashire. *The Inquirer* will skip one issue for a Christmas break and the next issue will be dated 9 January 2010. Happy Christmas to all and thank you to the writers and subscribers for all your support.

– MC Burns

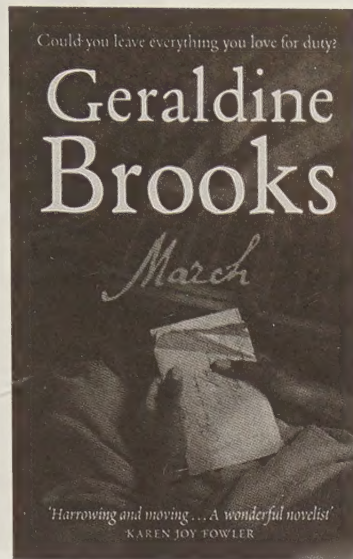
Ideals and grim realities

(Continued from previous page)

liberation' seemed only to be making things worse because, at that point, a Union victory was far from assured.

But finally he goes home, his objections countered by a nurse and former slave: 'Go home, Mr. March. ... If you sincerely want to help us, go back to Concord and work with your own people. Write sermons that ... prepare your neighbours to accept a world where black and white may one day stand as equals.'

He responds, feebly: 'But I don't know if I can preach any more...' And then he is taken back to Concord and home: 'But I was not alone ... and the young Laurence boy pranced brightly ahead of us ... carrying on as if he brought some bright-wrapped, welcome Christmas gift.' The gift was a father, being returned to his four daughters, his four 'little women', Meg, Jo, Amy and Beth, for these are indeed the 'Little Women' of Louisa May Alcott's classic children's novel. Brooks' novel is a sort of companion to 'Little Women', but it is a very different one! Louisa May Alcott, herself a Uni-

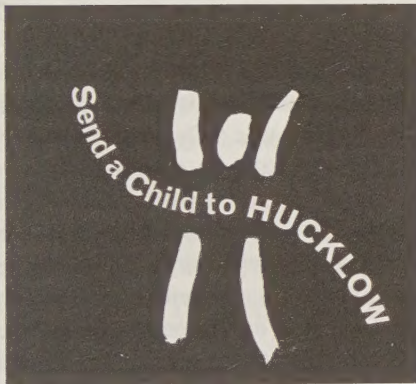


tarian, certainly makes her readers aware of slavery, the 'Underground Railroad', and the Civil War, but her story is about the lives of a close and loving family modelled on her own. And prominent in the early chapters is one of the most charming Christmases in literature – the Christmas that Captain March writes of so wistfully in that letter home. It is about simple, homemade pleasures. It is about the giving of gifts that speak of love rather than greed, ostentation and needless expense. It is about generosity shown to the truly poor by children who, when Christmas Day dawned, had mistakenly thought themselves poor. But their absent father is never far from their thoughts. As Beth says of him, 'I'm afraid he isn't having such a merry Christmas as we are.'

This Christmas, there will be many people of whom we might say the same. So, each in our own way, let's do something about it and, like Meg, Jo, Amy and Beth, 'find some merriment and some meaning.'

The Rev Cliff Reed is minister at Ipswich.

The Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow Fund



There were eleven holidays in 2009. The children's descriptions of what the holidays meant to them are deeply moving.

*Thank you for helping to make these holiday possible.
Please help us to continue giving needy children a country holiday.*

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Your gifts for the 2010 holidays will be as deeply appreciated as ever. **Our target is £30,000 for direct donations. It costs approximately £250 per child and we hope to send two hundred children in 2010.**

Gifts will be gratefully received by the Hon. Assistant Treasurer, Rev. Chris Goacher, 24 Arlington Drive, Derby, DE24 0AU. Please note that the Fund can reclaim income tax paid by any individual (as long as s/he has paid income tax) if a Gift Aid Donation form has been signed. **Please note** that this is now a vital part of the fund's income. Please help in this way if you can. A copy of this form will be inserted in a December issue of *The Inquirer*, or may be obtained from Mr. Goacher. Giving with a Gift Aid Donation form makes a gift of £20 worth £25.65 to the Fund.

The Fund is a registered charity number 271585. All gifts are used for the holidays except for gifts in memory of someone that are put into a Capital Account and the interest is used for holidays. Please remember the Fund in your will. Legacies are a much appreciated and valuable income.

Copies of the report and appeal may be obtained from the Hon. Secretary Rev Ernest Baker, 145 Tullibardine Road, Sheffield, South Yorks., S11 7GN, telephone 0114 266 1070.

Light a candle, simple and profound

During a ministry in Hinckley, Peter Hewis was Chairman of Governors at a special school and often conducted school assemblies for children with varying disabilities.

By Peter Hewis

On Friday afternoon we lit four candles, but before lighting them something else happened and I was given a present. At least once a term I conduct an assembly in Dorothy Goodman School. It is a Special School where many of the children are severely disabled, others moderately so and therefore your ideas have to be uncomplicated.

On arrival the head teacher asked me to go to the classroom of the oldest children and outside the door on the floor was a kind of carpet made of coloured abstract patterned paper squares. I wasn't sure if a child had dropped the colourings but then the door opened and a boy said, "Welcome to our home, would you like a mug of tea?" That mug of tea was the present and the carpet-like pattern was a greeting to their classroom for people to walk over. The school children were looking at *Celebrations* and this class had been thinking of the Hindu Festival called Diwali. One of the oldest boys, Kalish is a Hindu and when I asked him about Diwali he could tell me the whole story.

So why was the carpet pattern by the door? Well, it was not unlike those advent wreaths that many hang outside as Christmas approaches – it was a sign of welcome. Around this time of year Hindus use rice flour to create a pattern called rangoli in front of their household shrine. Rangoli appears on the floors in all Hindu houses to welcome visitors. The children had adapted slightly so that their rangoli pattern welcomed all visitors to the classroom. The boy Kalish was so excited that he reeled off his story of the festival Diwali but I'll use my own words. In brief, Diwali is a Hindu Festival of light held around one of the darkest points of the year, usually mid to late November. The festival celebrates the day when the Hindu God Rama returned to reclaim his kingdom after 14 years in exile, and houses all over India shine with tiny lights from clay lamps called diya to welcome him. The lamps are also lit as a kind of wish, that Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, will visit their homes. Diwali lasts for two days and on the second night families pray and feast and set off fireworks to ward off evil, spirits. People exchange gifts, often coconut sweets and small sugar discs called patashe – but in my case I was given the mug of tea.

At the school it was time to start the assembly and in the hall I had a wooden candlestick with four holders. Then I told the children that as they had been studying celebrations we would light four candles for different celebrations. The first candle was for a birthday, something that all children celebrate, it happened to be our daughter's birthday so that was for her but then a boy called Peter came in and it was his birthday so he was later invited to blow out the four candles. The second candle was for Diwali.

The third candle was also for a celebration in winter, the Jewish festival of Hannukkah the festival of lights – when candles are lit on a nine-branched candlestick. The candles are to remind them of the re-capturing of the Temple of Jerusalem more than 2000 years ago. Each candle represents one night of the festival plus one with which to light the others and each night families recite special blessings before the meal. Jewish children play games, one in particular is Dreidl where they pin



Photo by Irum Shahid

a four-sided top and the winners receive a pile of chocolate coins. Each side of the top is marked with a Hebrew initial and represents the sentence, "A great miracle happened there."

Many Jewish children receive eight tiny presents, one each day and then one big present – again not unlike Christmas here. A kind of potato cake called latka is made from grated potatoes, onions, flour and eggs then fried in olive oil. The oil represents the oil lamp that burned in the temple for eight days; the latkes are eaten with apple sauce and sour cream. Families will exchange presents and cards.

The fourth candle was for Christmas. A great Christian mid-winter festival celebrating the birth of a baby, not unlike the first candle for a birthday. In Slovakia 5 December is the eve of St Nicholas Day and children hang up stockings. In Sweden, December 13 is St Lucia's night, the patron saint of light and children light a candle, they eat buns and sing carols. The girl representing St Lucia wears a white dress and ties a red sash around her waist, on her head is a crown of candles. Here in Britain we hold Christmas Eve on December 24 and celebrate the expectation of a baby's arrival culminating the next day with the birth and the exchanging of presents.

All the children understood the meaning of a celebration; those that could see enjoyed the glow of the candles – especially when the school lights were extinguished.

We sat in silence for a little time looking at the candles and those that couldn't see had the scene described to them before the silence. In our silence we thought of all the school families and their celebrations. For one family a birthday, for another family Diwali, for a third family the forthcoming Hanukkah, for many families now the events leading to Christmas. And what symbolised all these things? A single candle, but then there was something more. There was the spirit of generosity and welcoming represented in the coloured patterns that we could see by the classroom door and throughout my talk I held the mug of tea, a simple gift from a Hindu boy and his friends in school.

Lighting a candle is such a simple act and yet the meaning is immense.

The Rev Peter Hewis is chaplain emeritus at Harris Manchester College, Oxford

A Yuletide story

De Miraculis

*Love shall be our token;
love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and to all men,
love for plea and gift and sign.*
— Christina Rossetti

By Naomi Linnell

Sir Rainald's servants found the young man lying beside the track leading to the Manor House. His clothes, though dishevelled, were made of fine cloth and his hands were pale and soft, but his eyes were blank and he could not speak. He had no visible injury and allowed himself to be led to the long-time empty cottage close to the Manor Farm. There Sir Rainald himself brought him a blanket of coney skins, a bed, a stool and a six-board oak chest black with age and beeswax. Each day food and wine, wood for the fire and candles to light the dark evenings of winter were sent to the cottage. Not a word did the young man speak, but he bowed low to Sir Rainald and nodded briefly to the servants.

One frost white morning, as the reluctant Christmastide sun rose behind the low timbered walls and the reed thatch, Aldret, a boy of perhaps 10 years lifted the latch of the young man's door, and went into the small dark room. He was ragged and grubby, but he smiled and bade the young man a Good Day as he unpacked his basket. The young man looked silently away, unsmiling. Was there anything else the master wanted, Aldret persisted. The young man hesitated, then pointed to the small wooden pipe which hung from the boy's belt. Play me a tune, he said, and lay back against the wool-filled mattress. Aldret put the mouthpiece to his lips and the young man shut his eyes.

As he always did, he saw in his mind's eye his wife Ysolt in her coffin, her new-born babe lying on her breast. The pipe filled the December gloom with the trilling of birds and the soft song of running water, and suddenly the darkness of the cottage seemed to be overwhelmed by a midsummer sun. He could hear laughter and there was Ysolt in her blue gown, her corn-gold hair flying out loose behind her as she danced with him in her father's hall. He walked with her once more across soft green fields and amongst the dancing dappled shadows of the ancient forest; he stood again beside her at the Christ's Mass in the cold church made warm by the light of a hundred candles which flickered and spluttered under the sheltering bows of slender ivy and scarlet-berried holly. He laughed and he wept, and he held out his arms to the life that was returning to him.

What miracle is this? Sir Rainald came into the cottage as the young man, smiling while the tears still ran down his cheeks, put a hand on Aldret's shoulder and a silver coin in his scrip. No miracle, my lord, the young man said, as when our Saviour was born of a Virgin and cradled in a manger. Rather it is the marriage of your abiding kindness to a mind-sick stranger with Aldret's generous sharing of his music with me that has opened my eyes again to the loving presence of my lady who lives on in my heart's memory. I give thanks to the generous God who has given to us so many discrete blessings and signs of his love. If courtesy and love such as I have found here in your Manor were always to direct us thus towards all whom we meet then, my lord, in this world we should perhaps have little need of miracles.

Naomi Linnell is a member of the National Unitarian Fellowship.



The Light of the World: William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), Manchester Art Gallery

Why I still believe in

What has happened to me has been the very reverse of what appears to be the experience of most of my friends. Instead of dwindling to a point, Santa Claus has grown larger and larger in my life until he fills almost the whole of it. It happened in this way. As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation. I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking, which in the morning became a full stocking. I had done nothing to produce the things that filled it. I had not worked for them, or made them or helped to make them. I had not even been good – far from it. And the explanation was that a certain being whom people called Santa Claus was benevolently disposed toward me..... What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency did give us those toys for nothing. And, as I say, I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea. Then, I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking; now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed, and the bed in the room, and the room in the house, and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void. Once I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dolls and crackers; now, I thank him for stars and street faces and wine and the great sea. Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a present so big that it only went halfway into the stocking. Now I am delighted and astonished every morning to find a present so big that it takes two stockings to hold it, and then leaves a great deal outside; it is the large and preposterous gift of myself, as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion except that Santa Claus gave it to me in a fit of peculiarly fantastic goodwill.

GK Chesterton

By Bill Darlison

They say that all people of a certain age can remember where they were when they heard the news of President Kennedy's assassination in November 1963. I certainly can. I was standing at the top of a staircase in a college hall of residence, and I can still remember the mingled feelings of disbelief, sadness, and a rather guilty excitement that the news provoked in me. I can also recall where I was when I heard about Marilyn Monroe's death, and Bobby Kennedy's, and John Lennon's, and a whole host of other significant moments, some of which have helped to define our history and our culture, and others of a more personal nature which are best kept to myself.

I can even remember where I was when I was told there was no Santa Claus. I was walking home from school with two girls – both called Joan, as it happens – who were two or three years older than I and so, to me, were fountains of worldly wisdom and experience. (The gulf that separates a 7-year-old from a 10-year-old is unimaginable at this remove.) 'There's no Father Christmas,' one of the Joans said. 'It's just your mum and dad who buy the presents.' I'd probably heard this before, but never from people so mature and so credible as these two, and it is quite possible that this particular declaration confirmed what I was beginning to suspect anyway, and corresponded with my own growing doubt about Santa's ability to squeeze his ample frame down narrow chimney pots and to visit every child on earth in one night. I ran the rest of the way home and confronted my mother with my anxieties, but her brave attempt to restore my childish faith was to no avail. Innocence was over. I had entered the adult world. Precisely on cue, at the age of seven, I had reached what Catholics call 'the age of reason'.

And I was to remain in this apparently reasonable frame of mind for well over 20 years, and when my nephews and nieces

were born I was very uncomfortable being part of the w Santa Claus hoax. This may have been the result of a grov disenchantment with Christmas itself which led me at tin to say (with some degree of affectation) along with that curmudgeon George Bernard Shaw, 'Like all intelligent peop greatly dislike Christmas.'

What helped to change my point-of-view was the es *Why I Believe in Santa Claus*, by Shaw's arch intellectual and close personal friend GK Chesterton. This made me rea that the Christmas madness, so deplored by the puritan Shaw, was a psychologically necessary season of the hu soul, and that Santa Claus, far from being a creation of Victo sentimentality, as modern cynics would have us believe, is re a personification of a gracious and grateful attitude to life, wh is as old as the human race, and which now, as much as ever need to celebrate and to promote.

Evidence of the necessity of Christmas can be found in ubiquity. All cultures seem to celebrate it, and they celebra in similar ways, generally by reversing the customary rout and presuppositions of life. In the northern hemisphere, this is darkest time of the year. The sun has barely risen before it again, and it spends the best part of the few daylight hours po just above the horizon, causing maximum inconvenience motorists. It is not difficult to imagine our ancestors, fearful le should disappear altogether, devising ceremonies of sympath magic to encourage the declining sun to reverse its direction. we want the sun to break free from its routine, they reason. we must break free from our own. In the Roman Saturn celebrated between 17th and 23rd December, this inversion custom and routine was almost total: all the normal affairs of s and business were suspended, and the people gave themse up to the mad pursuit of feasting and revelry. According to James Frazer, this break from normal routine was nowhere m marked than in the relationship between slaves and mas 'The distinction between the free and the servile classes temporarily abolished,' he writes in *The Golden Bough*. ' slave might rail at his master, intoxicate himself like his bet sit down at table with them, and not even a word of reproof w be administered to him for conduct which, at any other sea might have been punished with stripes, imprisonment, or de Nay, more, masters actually changed places with their slaves waited on them at table; and not till the serf had done eating drinking was the board cleared and dinner set for his master'

Turning everything on its head was a call to the sun to round. It was also a nostalgic glance backwards to a supp Golden Age, the age of the god Saturn, where there wer wars, when the earth brought forth abundantly, when sla and private property were unknown and all things were hel common.

The human race has always felt that things were better in remote, mythical past – hence the story of the Garden of Ede the Jewish scriptures – but what is experienced and celebrat a memory is really an aspiration: this is how it could be, and just a few days in the year we'll live as if it were so.

Santa Claus is part of that aspiration. He represents an atti to life that is the complete opposite of the one that we encount our customary dealings with the world. When we cease to bel in his 'peculiarly fantastic goodwill' (as Chesterton expresse we open ourselves up to far more insidious influences.

We enter the dreadful world of the *quid pro quo*. We I

Santa Claus



the normal human operating principle is: you buy me this I'll buy you that; you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. And, what is even worse, we are soon introduced to the basic laws of commerce: there are no free lunches; nobody does anything for nothing; everyone has his price; trust is for fools; we are defined by what we own. When we dethrone the demigod Santa Claus, we elevate the oldest deity of all, Mammon, the omnipresent, omnipotent god of the market-place, whose priest is the crooge, and who exhorts us all to take what we can where we can, and sees to it that a footballer can earn in one week what an average worker will earn in 10 years, and what half the world's population will never earn in a lifetime.

Instead of receiving our talents and everything else that we are given as unmerited gifts that we can share with our brothers and sisters, we treat them as commodities that we can exploit for our own personal advantage.

How different is Santa Claus, who gives us everything for nothing; all we have to do is to go to sleep or to pretend that we are asleep. Some years ago, the comedian Eddie Izzard said that Christmas was great when he was a child. He got lots of fantastic stuff and all he had to do in return was to stick a few bits of tinsel on a piece of coloured paper and give it to his granny. There were no thoughts of getting what we deserved then, no preposterous claims like Cheryl Cole's in the L'Oréal adverts that 'I'm worth

We really do have an unmerited belief in our own worth. We may not have as much as others – and we certainly would have more than we have – but we've worked for these things and we deserve them. Willingness to work hard and to postpone

gratification are, in middle-class circles, not only demonstrations of our prudence and common-sense, *they are virtues*. And we are virtuous! How God must love us! Our wealth is a reward for our virtue. We deserve what we have. We've even invented a category for those who don't have so much but are virtuous too – 'the deserving poor' we call them, to distinguish them from the *undeserving* poor, the troublesome, noisy, uncooperative, non-virtuous poor.

But with God, we are told in the Gospels, there are no such distinctions. God makes his sun shine and his rain fall on all alike, without recourse to our hierarchical categories. This is what St. Paul was saying when he told us that we are saved by grace; 'grace' is just the theological term for 'peculiarly fantastic goodwill'. Christianity teaches us that God creates and sustains us, not because of anything we've done or will do, but simply out of 'peculiarly fantastic goodwill'. All we can ever do in return is the moral equivalent of sticking tinsel on bits of coloured paper.

Santa Claus is a wonderful symbol of the universe's continuing benevolence towards us, a benevolence that we can neither exhaust nor deserve. Reacquainting ourselves with Santa Claus, and the topsy-turvy world he stands for, is the only hope we have of reversing our current insanity and of establishing a just and equitable society with peace and peculiarly fantastic goodwill to all.

The two Joans don't realise what they robbed me of on that fateful journey home from school: it took nearly half a century for me to realise it myself.

The Rev Bill Darlison is minister of the Dublin congregation.

Photo by Julia Freeman-Woolpert

It's the music that makes Christmas

By Ant Dawson

For a musician (organist and organ builder), such as myself, it is always the music of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany that stirs the most emotions and memories; the great tunes of Christmas, which we can only sing or play once a year. Such a shame that the majestic 'Adeste Fideles' or the tenderness of Harold Darke's setting of 'In the Bleak Midwinter' can only be used once per year, but then, to me, that makes them all the more special, more treasured and makes me relish them more. Something special, rather like a good port, to be savoured only at special times of year.

I was brought up a Methodist – my familial connections with Westgate End Methodist Church in Wakefield go back to 1813 when a mission was started there and my family were amongst the founders, but more latterly paying for the 1896 Abbott & Smith Organ and providing the bulk of the choir and all the Organists and Choirmasters for three or four generations. Being of the Wesleyan sort, services were always dominated by music, even more so at Christmas when the choir would perform Handel's Messiah and seasonal anthems during the usual services.

One of our traditions, and one I believe to be unique, was the singing of the old English carol 'The Holly and the Ivy' for the lighting of each candle of the Advent Wreath as the Introit before each service followed by words from Scripture. For the Christmas Eve carol service which basically a free for all

hymn-a-thon one of our great traditions was upheld: the singing of 'While Shepherds Watched' to anything but the dreary, ancient, boring 'Winchester Old'! Those Shepherds watched to 'Lyngham' – the proper tune in my book – 'Shaw Lane', 'Brother James' Air', 'Diadem', 'Miles Lane', Lydia' and to what is Yorkshire's Anthem, 'Ilkley Moor Ba tat'. Sung to the tune 'Kingsfold' it makes a lovely meditative, contemplative carol. It was always interesting to see how the organist responded to various tunes being called out to sing 'While Shepherds' to!

It's the music that makes Christmas.

The use of the 'Ilkley Moor' is a custom at Westgate Unitarian Chapel as well, and I well remember when I was organist at a Methodist Church in Leeds striking up 'Ilkley Moor' and observing the minister's look of horror at the use of this 'secular' tune. What may be one person's custom may not necessarily be someone else's!

Singing in Christmas even extended to the home; 'Christians Awake' was the favourite carol of both my maternal grandmother and great grandmother, sung to the tune 'Yorkshire' (when resident in Manchester, that tune goes by its other name, 'Stockport'!), and it was sung each Christmas morning before chapel, accompanied by the piano, the harmonium or more latterly pipe organ, the smell of turkey roasting in the oven and the cats thinking the Christmas tree and its decorations was put up especially for them to play with... or in.

The Advent Journey

Arthur Bruce/Sue Good

When the days hold faint mem'-ry of the sum-mer's brief stay Through the cold and the
We can read ma - ny ver-sions of the com - ing of light How the dark was dis-

dark-ness we fol - low the way The spark in the dis-tance, the flic - ker of flame And the
- pelled by the glo - ry of right But eve - ry-day mir - ac - les need no dis - play And the

point in our jour - ney that's hard - est to name Now we move in - to wis - dom with the
won - der of yes - ter - day hap - pens each day For the child is the to - ken and the

ad - vent of light Our growth and re - demp-tion are ne - ver in doubt
fore-taste of spring A pledge that the life will most sure - ly re - turn

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Help stop violence in Congo

Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, joined leaders from various faiths to commemorate the 10th Anniversary of the Great Congo Demonstration held at the Royal Albert Hall on 19 November 1909. That demonstration, hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, was a protest of Christian England against the violence in the then Congo Free State.

Exactly 100 years on, multi-faith representatives of religious organisations from across the UK gathered with celebrities, business women and men, activists and politicians from all parties in the Royal Albert Hall to highlight that violence and exploitation remains a major scar on the conscience of the modern world.

Over the past 12 years, the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has claimed the lives of an estimated 6 million people and sexual violence is being used in eastern Congo to torture and humiliate women and girls and destroy families.

The gathering was organised by the V-Day UK Committee to stop the Rape of Women and Girls of the Congo. V-Day Founder and Playwright Eve Ensler said 'What we are seeing in the DRC is a war being enacted on the bodies of women that is conscious and intentional – it is the systematic destruction of the female population of the Congo'.

Hundreds of thousands of women and girls have been raped since the conflict began. In addition to the severe psychological impact, sexual violence leaves many survivors with genital lesions, traumatic fistulae, severed and broken limbs, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

Derek said, 'In 1909 the campaign against the exploitation, slavery and murder of the people of the Congo led ultimately to the demise of the King Leopold's personal empire. In 2009 we must awaken to the catastrophe that is taking place in the Congo and we in the UK must not be silent. We must use our influence to help stop the horrors of the Congo and ensure the international community rises up to support and empower these women and girls.'

'One hundred years ago the auditorium of the Royal Albert Hall was full. In 2009 we were relegated to a basement and apparently told to behave and not 'protest'. Such is the apathy and lack of knowledge to what is one of the most inhuman situations in the world today.'

The event is the first in a series that make up Congo Now – an international campaign that unites a coalition of more than 20 of the UK's biggest NGO's plus UK parliamentarians. The campaign combines British and Congolese voices to demand an end to the world's worst humanitarian crisis – an action to address its underlying causes and consequences. The campaign will reach a climax in June and July 2010, when the DRC celebrates 50 years of independence.

'It is easy to say that this is such a big problem we can do nothing,' Derek said. 'On the day of the commemoration event, I received an appeal to Unitarians for financial support from the Quaker Congo Partnership. The group has been active over the past year in supporting Quaker led initiatives in the eastern Congo, including the only hospital for many square miles, trauma counselling and a women's income generation project.'



A young mother in the maternity ward of the Quaker hospital in Abeka, now struggling to maintain its essential services in the face of fighting, displacement and insecurity in the area. Photo courtesy of Quaker Congo Partnership.

Two weeks ago they learned that fighting had returned to the region and people have fled from their homes in Ukeka, in South Kivu. There have been no civilian casualties registered as a result of the recent fighting, however several thousand people have been displaced towards Uvira and Baraka including many Quakers from CEEACO (Community of Evangelical Churches of Friends in the Congo), the Yearly Meeting in the area. A number of families have also fled to Burundi in fishing boats.

Patients of the Abeka hospital were among those who fled the fighting in Abeka. CEEACO has chosen to keep the hospital open, and has elected to give free treatment to patients during this period, due largely to the fact that almost all of the other surrounding health centres are now closed and many have been looted.

An emergency appeal has been launched and there is an immediate need for food, transport and medical supplies, and strategic peace-building.

The plight of the Congo was highlighted earlier this year in Manchester at a City Centre Churches Forum Lent event, involving Quakers and Unitarians.

'With the approach of Christmas it's too easy to settle down into our comfortable homes and enjoy warmth, good food and drink, family and friends,' Derek said. 'We should not forget people just like forced to flee their homes and living outdoors and facing the dangers of cholera'.

If you and/or your church or chapel wish to support this appeal please send your donation to:

'Cambridgeshire Area Quaker Meeting Congo Fund', to: Quaker Congo Partnership, The Treasurer, Cambridgeshire Area Meeting, Friends Meeting House, 12 Jesus Lane, Cambridge CB5 8BA, UK. Or, send to Essex Hall (address on page 4) with cheques made out to 'GAUFCC' with Congo written on the back. Essex Hall staff will ensure it gets passed directly to the Quaker Congo Partnership. For more information see: Quaker Congo Partnership www.quakercongo.org.uk or V-Day www.vday.org/

Friends bid farewell to Kath Mayor

KATH MAYOR 1915 – 2009

Kath Mayor died peacefully on 26th October 2009.

She was born in 1915 near Manchester, into a Unitarian family and had one brother Roy, to whom she was devoted. Sadly, he died as a young adult.

Bad eyesight precluded Kath from a career as a teacher or a librarian so she was employed in the accounts departments of various engineering firms.

In 1944 she married Albert, whose work in the Admiralty meant that they lived in various places around the country, and Kath found support, security and stability in her Unitarian family, centred on Great Hucklow, home of the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre.

Kath was a passionate supporter and tireless worker for Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow, the charity which provides holidays for underprivileged children.

She wrote 24 booklets called 'Junior Network' for REYD, beginning in 1976.

These booklets were aimed at 7-11 year olds. Kath wrote stories, poems and devised the activities for them. She had great rapport with children and young people; she saw the best in them and wanted the best for them.

Kath attended Family Holiday Conference weeks for many years and contributed to the famous *Hucklow Herald*. She had countless friends in the movement. She was good company and a great raconteur, with a fund of interesting and amusing stories, both of her family and of Unitarianism. Kath took many excellent services and was a founder member of the Bath Fellowship, of which she was made Life President.

She had an extensive knowledge and great love of English



Kath Mayor, as her many friends will remember her, happily conversing on the terrace of her beloved Hucklow.

Literature and gained an Open University degree when she was 60; this, coming after her rejection as a librarian, was a great credit to her persistence and determination.

Her health declined in later years, and it was through the devotion of Frances Shipley, Kath's principal carer, that she was able to remain in her own home.

In the words of a song much loved by Kath – Ewan McColl singing *The Joy of Living* – Kath has now said 'Farewell, you Northern Hills', which to her were the Derbyshire Peaks; but we remember how we shared with her the joy of living.

Kath will be greatly missed by everyone who knew her.

– Sonya Richards and Barbara Smith



Retirement of church Administrator

The 22nd of November was a significant date for Scarborough Westborough Unitarian Church, marking as it did the 80th birthday of Lay Leader Walter Robinson, and also his official retirement as that church's administrator. In appreciation of Walter and his wife Pat's steadfast commitment and popularity over the 12-year duration of his appointment, the Rev Robin Boyes was on hand to present Walter with a portrait by artist Alice Maw, commissioned by the congregation and Trustees. Walter declared himself delighted by the gift, and drily commented, 'It's a big improvement on the original!' Speaking for the congregation, church member Heidi Kipling said, 'Walter's guiding presence and good counsel will be very much missed and therefore Westborough Unitarian Church hope that he will remain a guiding light in the future of the church for many years to come.'

– Heidi Kipling

ROSSLYN HILL UNITARIAN CHAPEL, HAMPSTEAD, NORTH LONDON

SEEKS MINISTER

Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel is a theologically diverse and vibrant community with 175 adult and 30 child/youth members. We seek an experienced, well-rounded, intellectually stimulating and inspiring spiritual leader with strengths in worship, pastoral care and administration, willing to make a commitment of at least three years. Pay scale is above the GA-recommended level.

The chapel is a beautiful building with a small manse alongside. We employ a full-time Administrator and part time Music Director. The chapel is active with two Sunday services, children's chapel, a teen group, occasional evening study courses, a choir, social action committee...

Start date is April 2010

For further information/application form, see
<http://www.rosslynhillchapel.com>

To apply, please contact the Rev Dr Ann Peart
ann.peart3@virginmedia.com



Derek McAuley and Margaret Kirk enjoy a laugh at the Engagement Groups weekend. Photo by Mary Spurr

Getting the relationships right

By Yvonne Aburrow

The engagement groups weekend at Great Hucklow was short but stimulating, and cleverly organised so as to do two things at once: to share experiences of working in small groups, and to practice the techniques of facilitating and sharing.

We began with an explanation of engagement groups. They help to develop community by generating compassion, deep listening and sharing, an appreciation of diversity, and renewal. They foster creativity and engender right relationship. They also broaden our understanding of spiritual practice: not just solitary pursuits like prayer or meditation, but sharing our spiritual life with others.

Engagement groups begin with the lighting of the chalice, and then a period of check-in. This is an opportunity for participants to express how they are feeling. It may be something as simple as a gesture, or it may be an opportunity to talk about one's recent experiences. The group also takes time to review the group principles, which are always developed and agreed upon by participants.

What makes engagement groups special is that they are safe spaces in which to share creativity, sacred play, and a sense of the wonder of life. They are not encounter groups where you are required to 'bare your soul'; each person only discloses as much as they feel comfortable with.

There are many different types of engagement group, but they all share the chalice-lighting and the check-in and the group covenant. There are walking groups, cultural groups, book circles, poetry groups, prayer groups, creativity groups (doing different types of crafts), Bright Lights (the intergenerational group at Bristol), and many more. The shared activity, whatever it is, helps to develop the sense of community.

We also looked at the role of facilitators, and practised facilitation. Facilitators need support, and it is best to have at least two facilitators for every group, to avoid burn-out. The initial facilitator can develop others in the role, sharing responsibility, learning from and discussing experiences.

We then looked at issues like 'awkward' people (an exercise in the practice of tolerance), how to include new people in a group that has already formed a bond, maintaining continuity without staleness, how to fund materials for creativity groups, timekeeping, avoiding the perception of 'cliqueyness', awkward silences, someone feeling undermined, achieving closure if the group comes to an end, how much the facilitator should lead, what to do if someone is absent. Many creative solutions to these issues were suggested.

We then looked at how to start engagement groups in our own communities, and everyone was very enthused. Many people had come with an idea for a group, and felt empowered to start on their return.

The event was very ably facilitated by Margaret Kirk, Jim Robinson, Lindy Latham, Joyce Ashworth and Jane Blackall, all of whom have run engagement groups for some time and were able to share their considerable experience with us.

As someone who has run small groups in the past, I can wholeheartedly recommend the engagement group structure as a well-worked-out way of creating safe space for spirituality, creativity and sharing.

Yvonne Aburrow is a member of Frenchay Chapel, Bristol. The Engagement Support is a Panel of the GA's Education and Training Commission (ETC). Email: info@unitarianengagementgroups.org.uk for more information or visit our website: www.unitarianengagementgroups.org.uk

News in brief

Park Lane hosts roadshow



The Youth Team rolled out their travelling Roadshow one bright Saturday afternoon in September. The venue was Park Lane Unitarian Chapel, Ashton-in-Makerfield; this was a combined Merseyside District initiative.

The team treated us all to a "Taste of Hucklow" and packed the afternoon with activities, we made name badges, we cooked! (Iced biscuits with sweeties on the top Yummy....) there was storytelling and interactive games, we all ran around and got thoroughly over excited-and that was just the adults!

The children enjoyed the event immensely and were keen to hear from the leaders all about Hucklow week-ends, children who have already attended week-ends joined in to add their voice to the general acclaim. Two children who have never been to a Hucklow booked in for the next week-end.

Fourteen children from across the district attended the event and the photograph shows them alongside the Youth Leaders. This was the second Youth Roadshow and a similar event can be available for other districts too, so if you want the team to set up a fun filled afternoon in your area please contact Sue Howard on e-mail at sue.howard@ntlworld.com

— The Rev Lynne Readett.

News from the Worship Panel

Worship material is becoming increasingly available on websites, but for those of you who appreciate the look and feel of a book, may I remind you of the Worship Panel publication *With Heart and Mind* (published 2007). This is a collection of over 40 mini-essays on a range of topics, written by ministers and lay people.

Each is accompanied by a related prayer or meditation. The topics range from the profound ('Time and eternity') to the mundane ('Clutter'), but the range of topics and styles guarantees that there will be something of interest for the person leading worship, as well as the person who likes a moment of reflection before switching out the light. Creative use of the material is encouraged in a helpful introduction, written by the book's editor David Dawson.

Copies are still available from Essex Hall at a cost of £6 plus 72 pence p&p. It would make a very nice gift (perhaps to a non-Unitarian friend, as a way of introducing our ethos!) Contact Audrey Longhurst at Essex Hall alonghurst@unitarian.org.uk (020) 7240 2384



Edinburgh fundraises for Retreat Centre

Several members from Edinburgh have spent inspiring and nourishing periods of time at Haughland House, the Unitarian Retreat Centre on Orkney and wanted to give something back by doing some fundraising for the centre. Haughland House was Edinburgh's designated cause for the months of September and October. Liz Lumsden (r-above) organised a very successful Orkney-themed lunch and afternoon of entertainment at St Mark's and there was a raffle for a framed photograph of Orkney. In all, £303 was raised to support the work at Haughland House.

The journey to Shapinsay is not a short one, even from Edinburgh, but if you look on it as part of the pilgrimage of slowing down, it can all add to the experience. Haughland House under the sole leadership of pioneering Lay Pastor Lesley McKeown. (l-above) It struggles financially, being so far from other Unitarian centres. Edinburgh Unitarians were happy to be able to make a small contribution to the Unitarian work being done at this, our most northerly outpost.

— Maud Robinson

IARF Conference

By Jeff Teagle

Peter Sampson and Jeff Teagle attended the IARF's (International Association for Religious Freedom) European and Middle East Regional (EME) Conference in Mannheim, Germany from 22-25 October. This was held in response to the high level of enthusiasm generated by the IARF EME Belfast conference of July 2008.

Wolfgang Jantz and Gudrun Hahn volunteered to organise it and were soon joined by EME President, Wytse Dijkstra. IARF member Freireligiose Gemeinde, Mannheim provided their community centre for the meetings and were wonderfully welcoming hosts. The Freireligiose Gemeinde had just celebrated its 150th anniversary and the conference room contained an exhibition of its history. A short distance away in neighbouring Ludwigshafen, the Freireligiose Gemeinde also provided the location for a parallel Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN) conference, organised by IARF Council member Morse Flores.

The conference was well attended by a mixture of long-term IARF members and newcomers. The new Transylvanian Unitarian Bishop, Balint-Benczedi Ferenc, led a significant delegation, including seven for the RFYN conference. IARF President Thomas Mathew (India) and Council members

(Continued on next page)

County Durham native paints paradise

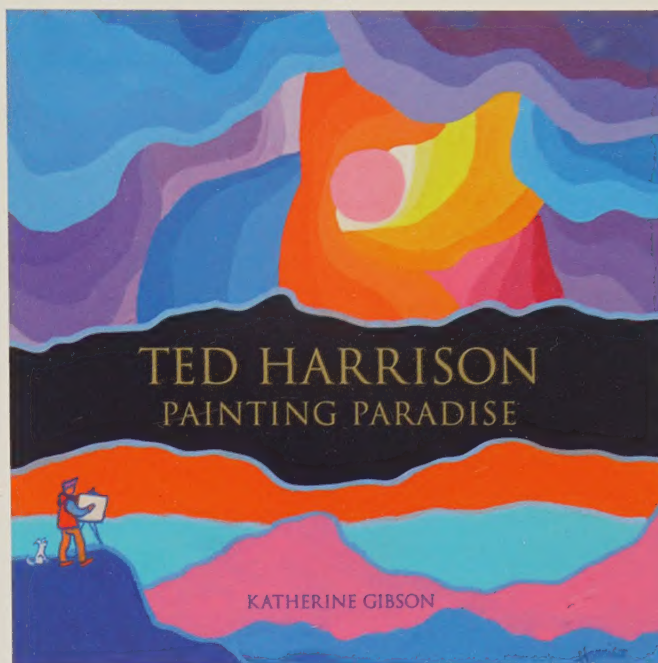
By John Hird

Half a century ago I worked alongside a lively and enterprising art master called Ted Harrison. He impressed with an energy and outlook that went way beyond the confines of the school's art room so when his biography appeared during the summer I was keen to have a copy. There was a little delay in getting the book as he had spent the last 40 years in Canada. It was well worth waiting for, a most magnificent volume giving a well written account of his life and generously illustrated with many examples of his distinctive paintings. Even the footnotes caught my eye when I discovered that on retirement to British Columbia he had joined the Unitarian Church. Furthermore the biographer, Katherine Gibson, is a fellow Unitarian.

As a boy growing up in a mining village in County Durham, Ted was excited by stories of the Klondike. This early interest was reawakened when in later life he learned of a critical need for teachers in northern Canada. He and his Scottish wife, Nicky, rose to the challenge in the words, "No weakling need apply". Answering the *Call of the Wild* and renewing acquaintance with the poems of Robert Service led to work on a new set of illustrations for *The Cremation of Sam McGee* and *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. Both books were an immediate success and among the many plaudits received was a handwritten letter of appreciation from Ronald Reagan.

When Ted saw how inappropriate some of the schoolbooks were for Native Americans he set about producing his own versions. Arising from this came the two books, *Children of the Yukon*, and *A Northern Alphabet*. They were greatly appreciated, not only in the Yukon, but also at exhibitions in Italy and Cyprus. Furthermore a note was received to inform that they had attracted favourable attention from the Prince and Princess of Wales.

Designing stained-glass windows for the Yukon's Cathedral



in Whitehorse was another avenue of creativity. One window was a memorial to a person much admired by Ted. It was dedicated to Dr Hilda Hellaby who had devoted much of her life to the well being of Native Americans.

With success and recognition Ted gave freely of his time and gifts. He is a Unitarian we can be proud to have among us, as also, is to his splendid biographer, Katherine Gibson.

Ted Harrison: Painting Paradise by Katherine Gibson

Published by Crown Publications, British Columbia.

www.crownpub.bc.ca E-mail: crownpub@gov.bc.ca

ISBN: 978-0-9809674-1-8

Issuing a call to promote freedom

(Continued from previous page)

Shlomo Alon (Israel) and Esther Korpels (Netherlands) also participated.

Three workshops addressed the IARF's role and future potentials:

1) Wies Houweling's workshop considered the IARF's relative position to other interfaith bodies.

2) Chris Hudson facilitated a very active public relations workshop.

3) Wytse Dijkstra's workshop considered the organisation and governance of the EME Region.

An important outcome of the workshops was the creation of an EME Steering Committee comprising of Wytse Dijkstra (Chair), Lucie Meijer (Treasurer), Shlomo Alon, Glenn Bauer and Jeff Teagle.

Other features of the conference were a promotion of the IARF World Congress 2010 by Thomas



Mathew, an explanation of IARF's role within the United Nations by our representative John Taylor, and a guided tour Heidelberg. We completed the programme on Sunday morning by joining the RFYN and the Freireligiouse Gemeinde congregation of Ludwigshafen, where its minister, Renate Bauer, graciously facilitated participation by members.

The conference achieved everything it set out to do. By bringing its members together at this time, it has generated a renewed feeling of purpose and community and laid the foundations for participation in Congress and further EME activities in 2011 and beyond.

Jeff Teagle is Company Secretary of IARF. Photo (left) of the Free Religious Church at Ludwigshafen by Onno Oesburg.

Decorating the Tree

Weave trails of silver through the branches,
Gently, gently guide them round the dark pine
clusters.

Feel the needles prick,
Smell the forest track – the bark of spruce and
larch.

Imagine great cedars of Lebanon.

What is this ritual?
What instinct has me lost in the fold and flow of
this tinsel trellis?

Weave trails of silver in dreams and memories of
enchantment.

Take the silver bird from its faded newspaper
wrapping,
and the icicle and the snowflake and the bright
red-felted robin,
and the two corn dolls bought from a craft fair,
and the six polished red apples, light as a ping
pong ball,
coveted and pawed by the cats,
who now sit mesmerized by glints of darting
light,
and the quiver of movement as they hang
suspended on golden thread.

Weave trails of silver through lives waiting for
magic,
For bright baubles of delight bursting in
darkness.
For glittering moments when we are entranced
into belief.

*The Rev Margaret Kirk
First printed in The Inquirer in 2001*

